

November 29, 2009
First Sunday of Advent
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Waiting on Love

(1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 NRSV) How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? {10} Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. {11} Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. {12} And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. {13} And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Wow, has it started! The race is on. We are on the sprint to Christmas.

Many of you probably spent the weekend at the Black Friday door busters, or the Super Saturday sales.

Regardless, Thanksgiving signaled the official start to the race to Christmas.

For the next four weeks – many of us will be running with our heads cut off.

If you work in the retail business → you know what the next four weeks will bring.

Teachers, will just do their best to keep their students focused as the holidays beckon.

For Peggy and our children's leaders – the next few weeks are consumed with trying to get in one more rehearsal and making sure that everybody's egos aren't bruised.

Children will be working hard on their wish lists and often behaving a little better in hopes that maybe they will get rewarded come Christmas day.

And Nathan and I → well Nathan and I will be swamped as we try to get everything done by Christmas Eve!

Are you ready for all of this?

Is your master list ready with everything you will need to do over the next month?

Wait a minute! ... Before you start scrabbling through your schedules, your agendas and your calendars, consider that each and every one of us should begin our list with the same item, the Advent Attitude that Paul urges from the Thessalonians -- "Abound in Love."

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Getting that attitude is hard to do. Our Advent season is stolen by consumerism that keeps asking us "What do we want."

Wouldn't it be great if this year we could develop an attitude that celebrates wanting what we have rather than wanting to have more?

Paul tells us that we need to develop an attitude that abounds in love – How do we do that?

When Paul urged the Thessalonians to "abound in love," he was speaking to a community that had already had its capacity to love significantly challenged. Persecutions and suffering at the hands of the city's pagan officials, condemnations from the Jewish synagogue and contentions within their own ranks had threatened to strain the loving nature of the Thessalonians.

Some scholars suggest that the end-time expectations of some of the Thessalonians had led them to focus too intently on the future and fail to recognize the importance of their day to day lives.

Paul seems to suggest three ways that we should abound in love.

1. First, Love must REBOUND.

Rebounding, as every good basketball team knows, is more often than not the difference between winning and losing.

Whichever team rebounds most successfully becomes the team in control of the ball. The team that rebounds becomes the offense, goes on the move and heads toward the basket. Failure to rebound puts a team continually in a defensive posture, striving to protect its basket from the offensive team's onslaught.

Great rebounders take whatever comes their way, hurl themselves at the ball, and take possession of it for the sake of the team.

How good a rebounder are you? As Christians who are called to "abound in love," we must take whatever hits us and rebound it with love.

Our challenge as Christians is to:

- rebound love when we are clobbered with hate;
- to rebound love when we are jabbed with jealousy;
- to rebound love when we are shoved by pettiness;
- to rebound love when we are floored by dishonesty;
- to rebound love when we are plowed over by prejudice.

The next time you find yourselves in the midst of an almost riotous holiday shopping mob, try practicing your rebounding skills.

- Can you rebound love to the surly, sour-faced, part-time store clerk who doesn't see and doesn't care that you are trying to be polite and easygoing?
- Can you rebound love to the teacher who is going to assign you a 10-page paper to do over Christmas break?
- Can you rebound love to the office-mate who takes credit for your work and takes advantage of your good nature?
- Can you rebound love to the phone-marketing drone who calls during the dinner hour?

- Can you rebound love to militia maniacs, Ku Klux Klanners, Conservatives, Liberals, Democrats, Republicans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, gang-bangers, Gen-Xers, Boomers and Boosters?

Do you abound in that much love that you can rebound?

2. REDOUND

It's not enough just to get the rebound.
You've got to do something with the ball.

To "redound" something is to get a result, to have an effect.

Paul praised the Thessalonians because he saw their faith as part of the apostolic mission of the church.

To "abound in love" means we, too, must step forward into that line of faith that Paul talks about in Thessaloniki and add our voices and our testimony to that great cloud of witnesses.

It is not enough to know we are the recipients of God's love. We must redound with the abounding love of God.

To "abound in love," we must make love known to the world through the living of love.

There is a great Peanuts cartoon. In it Snoopy is shivering out in a snowstorm beside an empty food dish.

He is looking longingly, expectantly, toward the house.

Lucy comes out and says, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled!"

And then she turns and goes back into the house and slams the door. In the last frame you see a confused Snoopy looking toward the house, shivering and hungry and utterly baffled.

To make known the love of Christ takes more than words -- it takes action; it requires results.

Part of what makes so annoying those people who buttonhole you on the street, or at a party, or in the middle of your workday to "share" with you -- either their failures or their faith -- is that they aren't "sharing" at all.

They may be foisting.

They may be dumping or unloading.

They may even be exhorting.

But they are not sharing.

Lucy didn't "share" anything with poor, shivering Snoopy.

She did not have to sacrifice any of her time, her money, her space, her heart, her feelings or her needs in order to make that speech.

To make the love of Christ known genuinely, to proclaim that love to the world accurately, means we must redound Christ's nature in our own lives.

We redound love when we volunteer our most precious commodity, time, to help clean up basements that are still full of mold following last year's flood.

We redound love when we donate the funds we would have lavished on ourselves for Christmas to a small and struggling mission project.

We redound love when we give our favorite foods, diapers and formula, and some special goodies, not a whole case of peas, to the local food pantry.

We redound love when we turn off the computer and pick up our crying child, even though it will mean staying up late that night working in order to finish a job.

3. RESOUND

When something makes a lasting impact, when it lives in memory beyond the length of its days, when it reverberates beyond space and even time, we say that it resounds.

We can speak of someone being a resounding success -- but we also note that an event can fail with a resounding thud.

An echo resounds by repeating the same thing over and over again, while it grows fainter and less distinguishable with each repetition.

The view from a mountaintop resounds with a silence that grows and changes every time we stop and listen, and its strength is ever diminished.

We all have the capability of to create resounding effects with the actions and attitudes we act out in our lives.

Auberon Waugh tells a powerful story about his father the literary giant Evelyn Waugh. During the war, some government officials gave this great writer three bananas as a treat for his children. Waugh brought them home, showed them to his kids, and ate them. "It would be absurd to say that I never forgave him," his son writes, "but he was permanently marked down in my estimation."

Greatness of worldly stature can go along with smallness of soul. How loud and long smallness of spirit and hardness of heart can resound in a child's life.

We have only to glance at the New Testament to determine how resounding were the effects of Paul's ministry and message. This apostle, who seemed to spend more time in prison than out, has managed to have his words, his testimonies, resound throughout the church for two millennia. It is because Paul's words "abound with love" that they continue to resound with the spirit of truth as loudly today as they did when delivered before the Thessalonian Christians.

Do you have an attitude problem this Advent season? If you don't, get one.